

# 1 man's vision, tenacity give new life to barren hills

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EDITOR'S NOTE — President Bush has been making news in the West this week by planting trees and urging Americans to dig holes in their back yards and do the same. In Utah, a modern Johnny Appleseed has been planting trees, against all good advice, for 30 years.

**By David Foster**  
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MAGNA (AP) — Even as a boy, Paul Rokich sensed his future was tied to the barren hills behind Smelter Camp, the mining town where he was born.

The hills were black as tar and just as dead. Decades of logging, grazing, wildfires and sooty smelter fumes had whittled a once-verdant forest down to a couple of old snags atop a ridge.

"When I was 6, I saw those two dead trees," Rokich recalled, "and I knew I was going to go up and plant those mountains."

Fifty years later, Paul Rokich has done just that. The long-abused northern end of the Oquirrh, a range of hills south of the Great Salt Lake, has come alive with grasses, flowers, shrubs and trees.

It's a marvelous transformation, but it would never have started had Rokich listened to the experts. As a young botany student at the University of Utah, he told professors of his dream to revive the Oquirrh. They told him the eroded hills were beyond hope.

## DESERT NEWS

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On May 7, 1959, Rokich set out to prove them wrong. In the dead of night, he parked his car, hoisted a pack and hiked into the hills. He was trespassing on land owned by Kennecott Copper Corp.

Sulfurous mist from the smelter hung in the air. "It was so quiet and still, you couldn't believe it," he said. "There was no vegetation, no animals, nothing."

That first trip, Rokich planted a Russian olive tree and two plots of tall wheat grass. Over the years, he planted anything he thought might grow in the "desert pavement" of the Oquirrh. To finance his obsession — for that is what it became — he borrowed money from relatives, begged

donations from seed companies and dug into his modest earnings as a construction worker.

Once, one of his three boys was sick and the family was down to \$10. Rokich spent \$5 on medicine, \$5 on trees. "We didn't have extra money to spend on what he was doing," said his wife, Ann, "but he had a vision."

He also had the strength of a mule. At 6-foot-1 and 200 pounds, Rokich still hikes fast enough to leave a visitor half his age gasping. In the early days, he would start at 4 a.m., hiking and planting for 15 hours. To leave room for seedlings, he packed neither food nor water. He chewed elderberries found along the way, spit out the seeds and planted them.

He had many setbacks. Young trees succumbed to drought, early frosts, rock slides and hungry rabbits. One year, a sheep herder burned off a hillside, killing 3,000 new Douglas firs and ponderosa pines.

But slowly, grass took hold. Elderberry and sumac shrubs became thickets, and trees reached skyward.

After years of looking the other way, Kennecott in 1973 sent officials to inspect Rokich's work. They hired him. Rokich no longer had to smuggle in seedlings. He drove a company truck, planted trees by tractor and spread grass seed by the ton from a helicopter.

Today, in the canyon where Rokich started, fir trees are "coming in like hair on a dog's back," he said. Even Kessler Canyon, the area closest to the smelter and the most devastated, is being reclaimed.

"It was supposed to be impossible to grow things here in Kessler," Rokich said during a recent visit. "But look!"

Ten-foot-high locust trees poked up from a sea of grass. Sunflowers waved in the breeze. A mule deer peered from a thicket.

"I bet you there are 50 deer out there right now, lying in the bushes and watching us," Rokich said. There are also rabbits, partridge, bobcats and coyotes. Golden eagles and yellow-tailed hawks soar, and in autumn, the once-silent canyon echoes with the bugging of 200 elk.

Kennecott modernized its smelter in 1977, reducing pollution and giving vegetation a chance to grow. But company officials hand Rokich most of the credit for the Oquirrh's revival.

"Sure, the company would have



AP photo

**Paul Rokich surveys the fruit of his labors on replanted lands surrounding a Magna smelter.**

done revegetation work," said Frank Fisher, external affairs director. "But it wouldn't be anywhere as far along without a guy like Paul. He's truly a zealot."

Rokich figures he has personally planted 60,000 trees and shrubs on 14,000 acres. That first Russian olive tree is now 25 feet high. Last winter, an old bull elk looking for a place to die found shelter under its spreading limbs.

The years have turned Rokich's hair white, but at 56 he is no fading bull. His youthful optimism remains, evidenced by a perpetual grin and earnest brown eyes always scanning the next ridge for some happy surprise. The mountains have kept him young, he says, and his work has kept him satisfied.

Sometimes he sits in his truck and reads the hillside like others read a newspaper. Each precious plant has a history, and Paul Rokich knows the

details for it's his history, too. "You know, I thought that if I got this started, then when I was dead and gone, people would come and see it. I never thought I'd get to see it myself."

He stretched his arms wide, as if trying to embrace everything: the trees, the birds, the swaying grass.

"I'm amazed," he said. "Look at what I've done. What more could you want?"